
Perception Management in Conflict Zones

by
Brig SK Chatterji

Editor's Note: Brig SK Chatterji is a retired officer of the Indian Army. His views on engagement and influence operations are very salient given the growing security importance of South Asia and the important role that India is now playing in the interest of global security. This article represents an international view of engagement

Kinetic means of combat are increasingly failing to deliver comprehensive victory. In Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom led to a swift demise of the Taliban, however, effective control of Afghan territory still eludes Karzai, the NATO led coalition and the US forces. The requirement of shaping perceptions and realigning leanings of the local populace is an inescapable imperative for lasting influence in an area. However, getting people in such areas to believe you, especially when you are otherwise considered an aggressor, is not an easy task. It needs both actions to meet local aspirations and a carefully orchestrated information campaign to win the trust of the populace, realign their leanings and accept the outside forces fielded as partners in their progress. Though the centre of gravity (CG) during a military operation may vary, it's the populace and their leadership that is the CG both before and after military operations. These twin elements retain their preeminence, today, even during the intense combat phase.

Perception management operations, if initiated well before the military activities, offer the dividends of lesser friction in the ensuing combat phase. They cannot be lost sight of either, even

after pre-defined politico - military end states are achieved, whether it be fighting an insurgency within one's own national boundaries or an ocean away, as is the case for the US and their allies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The undertaking of such activities requires both an informative database and analytical skills. Every situation is different with varied ethnicity, religious following, status of personal liberty, degree of writ of insurgents/autocrats, and a host of other factors contributing unique characteristics. Such heterogeneity necessitates familiarization and evaluation before perception operations are launched. Certain defining factors in Perception Management initiatives, also termed as shaping the information environment, especially at the operational and tactical levels, have been debated in this article. Issues at the strategic level have only been mentioned in the passing.

Objectives of Perception Management at the Operational, Tactical Levels

Isolating the Insurgent

At the operational and tactical levels, the objectives of perception management primarily remain isolating the insurgents from the locals. A realisation in the locals that the forces deployed serve to create stable, secure and supportive governance, while the militancy subverts the fruition of their aspirations, is the objective. Creating a gulf between the people and the insurgents is central to a counter insurgency



Village in Jammu and Kashmir after Earthquake
Source: Brig SK Chatterji

campaign, and perception management offers a route to it. The gulf created, in turn, complements the efforts at militarily asserting ascendancy over inimical forces. Creating a divide between the various insurgent groups by well orchestrated information activities would serve to weaken their resolve and may hold out the possibility of internal conflicts that induce greater fatigue in the groups. Also an objective is creating a chasm between elements of the leadership, and the led. Very often, especially in long entrenched insurgencies, the leaders tend to live a life of relative luxury, while the rank and file survives in harsh conditions. Such a chasm lends to exploitation in terms of weaning away or degrading the confidence levels of the militants in their leaders.

Attitudinal Leanings

Influencing attitudinal shift in favour of own forces, is an objective. In any insurgency-infested area, three basic segments can be identified in the populace. There are the ones who support our endeavours, those who are against, and finally, the fence sitters. Perception management efforts must address all three segments. It should be the endeavour to retain the supporters, win over the fence-sitters, and initiate a shift in leanings of those who oppose us.

Supporting existing Governance and Institutions

The operations must also address the legitimate local government, institutions that have a constructive influence and key policies that promise stability. Their levels of confidence, both in the forces, as also in themselves with the forces backing them, require enhancement.

Proxy War Situation

In a proxy war-like situation, when a rogue state provides wherewithal to insurgents, the objectives of perception management would include exposing the nexus and relating the rogue states activities to the prevailing insecurity, lack of opportunities for growth and investments in the disturbed area. Illusions served by promises from across

the borders by another state, have to be shattered.

Perception Management: Strategic Levels

At the strategic level, perception management operations would entail getting the militant outfits into banned lists of other nations. It would also involve sanctions against foreign powers supporting the terrorists, materially or otherwise. Ensuring the drying up of outside financial, men and material support remains a huge challenge. Strategic perception management operations may or may not have either the Army or even the Ministry of Defence as the lead player, but lead by the Ministry of External Affairs and intelligence agencies at their disposal. It would be formulated at an inter-ministerial level with politico-military objectives being kept in view.

Situational Imperatives in an Active Insurgency Area

Assault on local Identity

When forces are fielded to achieve dominance, a swath of the population of that area is likely to identify such forces as an army of occupation. Whether or

not such a segment is the majority, they tend to become the stronger influence, if not for any other reason than purely due to the fact of their being far more violent and ready to use force to coerce the rest into being at best mute, if not activist to their will. The people do not know the objectives of the forces applied, and the hostile propaganda by hostile elements would paint such deployment as an assault on the locals' identity, faith and beliefs.

Aliens Forcing Entry

Race, religion and nationality of forces applied in an area offer the key cornerstones essential to define such a force as outsiders. What is certainly understood by the competing authorities in illegitimate control or vying for it in a destabilized area, is that a military operation by an outside force will dilute their ascendancy and control on resources, finally eroding their power. As such, these inimical elements will ensure opposition to the deployment of an outside force or Government troops combating insurgencies within national boundaries. The pivots of their arguments will be the easily perceptible differences



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between the locals and the force deployed. The congruence of the aspirations of the locals—peace, progress, stability and security with the objectives of the deployed force, will be obscured by their propaganda.

Lack of Familiarity with Area of Operations

The other side of the coin is equally important and it remains a fact that the forces operating often do not understand local conditions and sensitivities adequately. This results in varied problems, post deployment. As such, the willing participation in the effort of the local population, or a part thereof, is a potential that is not optimally garnered. Every area where influence is sought to be made paramount has its own cultural uniqueness. Methods applicable and acceptable in the New York or Delhi suburbs may be anathema in these operational areas. An intimate familiarity with the local customs, habits, influence pillars, need to be perceived by the residents of the area.

Choked Communications

The local population is often not aware of the positive spin-offs in as far as meeting their aspirations are concerned, as a sequel to the outside forces gaining an upper hand. The fact that they could be liberated from their state of poverty, bondage to an ideology, that their children could well live a life with adequate comforts and conveniences is often not perceived by the populace. The unrelenting propaganda and rhetoric of the militant elements holds many of them hostage, disallowing them the bonus that is around the bend. However, the hope of a better tomorrow for their children is not just a fleeting thought for them. Moreover, it can be strengthened.

Shaping Perceptions: Operational Planning and Execution

Selection of Themes for Propagation

Before beginning such an exercise, a detailed study of the environment that needs to be shaped will have to be undertaken. The cultural sensitivities are most important, especially in an orthodox environment where one misstep could easily lead to surrendering gains achieved over months of patient efforts. As such, the aspect of detailed mapping and database, to include their faith, leanings, sensitivities, aspirations etc., is a critical exercise that needs to be pursued with diligence by commanders, in their respective areas. Messages will have to be tailored for each segment to garner maximum dividends.

All communications will need to be carefully vetted to eliminate any offensive content. Even after being passed through such a sieve, the possibility of something being distorted by interested parties will need to be kept track of and remedial actions taken. It needs to be ensured that the deployment of forces is not viewed as an assault on the locals, nor is the objective the subjugation of locals.



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Themes involved can thus neither be top driven nor an entirely floor-level exercise. Further, it is essential to ensure that the language spoken at various levels is in congruence. Should contradictions arise in messages emanating from different headquarters, the terrorist establishments would seize the opportunity and paint the forces deployed as untrustworthy.

Precedence of Local Issues

While directing perception management initiatives, issues of importance to the local populace need to be addressed. Greater issues of global concern are often not of material value for people living in the backwaters. What is more important to them is either easing of hardships, sustainable means of livelihood or security concerns or living without fear for their families. Endeavours to alleviate the harsh local conditions will resonate with the populace, and if the payoffs seem tangible in the short timeframe, the locals would extend support.

Notwithstanding the need to satisfy the populace through short gestation period projects, it would be equally important to invest in long-term infrastructure, healthcare, educational, industrial and like projects. Such investments will assist in legitimizing the existing governance and serve the formulation of long-term influence in that region. Economic progress is also one of the best means of weaning away the younger lot from militancy.

Language of Communications

The language in which the themes need to be communicated unavoidably has to be the local language. However, different strata of the society in the targeted audience may have their own preferences in terms of use of certain more common languages like English, French, etc., especially in areas with an old colonial legacy. While directing Information Operations

across the targeted segments, language usage and any preferences of a particular segment must be taken into account.

Subtlety in Messages

While putting across the message it would be preferable to state the portion dealing with the inimical forces loudly, boldly and with adequate visual evidence. However, the same methodology may not hold true for drafting messages that communicate own activities or objectives. These need to be more subtle so as not to be identified as propagandist and thereby serve to create a wall of disbelief. Often, it would garner greater dividends if a comparison can be drawn of how the populace had been held hostage, vs the benefits that have accrued in places where the writ of inimical forces has been neutralized. Benefits accruing from projects being implemented are better articulated through the beneficiaries themselves, rather than by an official spokesperson.

Credibility

It is an all important factor. All messages have to be based on truth. The visual media will require evidence of what is stated to be concurrently shown in order to make the message forceful. Further, credibility in perception management is not like college grades that retain relevance for times to come. It is more a day-to-day rating that could easily slide.

Situations calling for Immediacy in Response

Certain messages that are intended to secure the lives of our men in distress need to promise lucrative returns. It could be a pilot bailing out over a hostile area, or an intelligence operative who has perforce to walk out beyond the area under control as a prerequisite to gathering enough operational intelligence. Eventualities that such personnel can face require immediate assistance from locals. Such imperatives have to be addressed with practicality, and an immediate monetary reward for any action taken by the locals to ensure the security of our personnel needs to be included and announced boldly.

Communication Resources

The availability of communication resources and their reach beyond the urban milieu into the villages and fringes will also need to be mapped. The reach of the message will depend on the availability of communication infrastructure in that region, and these may well have to be augmented, protected, and made available for own utilization while denying them to the opponents. Information Operations can be successful only if dissemination is broad based, utilizing every available opportunity, and multiple media. At the tactical-level interaction, the loud key communicator retains its relevance and the local religious congregation destination of the populace, an invaluable asset.

Selection of the Spokesperson

The acceptance of a message and its credibility is enhanced if it is delivered by someone trusted by the audience. Members of the forces employed do not qualify for such a status. It would pay higher dividends to enlist local community leaders enjoying a greater degree of acceptance, to be the spokesperson. Religious leaders of repute would enjoy better resonance and need to be co-opted.

As perception management and military operations progress successfully, military commanders operating in the area, start enjoying greater acceptance and credibility, provided human rights have all along been respected.

Winning Hearts and Minds

Such initiatives as undertaking small developmental projects, extending healthcare in remote places, creating educational facilities, providing vocational training, and veterinary facilities have an universal appeal and pay disproportionate dividends in conflict zones where such essentials are inevitably inadequate. And, as hopes of a better tomorrow take firm roots, a bond between the troops and the locals is also nurtured. Such projects also assist intelligence gathering. Their successful execution and satisfaction levels so attained also need to be broadcast widely.

Countering Inimical Propaganda and Media

Perception Management operations inevitably involve the countering of propaganda against own forces and allies by insurgent groups, their harbourers and covert workers. The first requirement for such an objective is the capability to monitor the media serving the area.



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It will also be essential to identify the reasons behind a channel supporting the militants' cause. In most cases, intimidation by militants will be found to be the prime reason. Other factors could include ethnic, religious leanings of the management, even biases of individual reporters.

Relationship Bridges with the Press

Whatever be the reasons, the first task is to create strong relationship bridges with the media. Allowing regular access to the media in their endeavour to contact formations employed in the area, will serve to provide the correct perspective to the media personnel. Media queries have to be handled with speed. The military hierarchical model and a tendency to centralize media responses at higher formation levels militate against timely response. Delay in response needs to be viewed as a handicap and it is minimized only if commanders at all levels understand fully well the complementarity of media to their operations.

Facilitation of Media

Media personnel also need to be facilitated in moving to areas where activities merit media coverage. The decision of which activities deserve such coverage needs to be arrived at in consultation with the media. Very often what commanders consider as newsworthy, is not viewed so by the media. However, facilitation of media coverage, more often than not, provides more positive coverage.

Countering Negative Coverage

Negative reporting needs to be contested through the media, based on truthful rendition of facts. Credibility of official spokesmen need to be always maintained. It is wiser not to react to negative coverage rather than feeding unsubstantiated or wrong/false inputs to the media.

There is a requirement for commanders at all levels not to overreact to negative media coverage. Some negative reportage will be there, and needs to be taken in



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stride. Should a media channel be acutely and unduly negative in its coverage, legal recourse needs to be taken if possible and the media countered with a different point of view. In places where the laws of the land cannot be imposed, kinetic or electronic means need to be used to silence such propagation. Further, media channels earn their revenue through advertisements, which in turn, is a tool that could pay dividends.

Coercive Perception Management

The terrorists could also use a combination of coercion and seemingly logical interpretation of tenets of faith to manage perceptions of the populace. Such acts as flogging a woman in public and publicizing them are carried out more to instill fear and subjugate the locals rather than any commitment to the tenets of faith of any religion. It is essential to ensure that the people of the area feel reasonably secure by proximate deployment of forces, a fact that goes to make counter insurgency operations manpower heavy. Barbarous acts committed by insurgents may be used to create a gulf between the insurgents and the locals. As the security situation improves, such a gulf will aid in intelligence collection and surgical operations, thereby reducing collateral damage.

Perception management operations need to be rooted in the felt needs of the population. The triggering of the belief that a better road lies ahead if the forces employed in the area are allowed to function without resistance is the prime initial objective. The forces operating can further such efforts only by the best standards of conduct and display of absolute respect for local customs. As perception management progresses, the challenge is to sustain the gains and promote the concept that it is a partnership with the local populace that the forces seek. Finally, the fact that the local people are being empowered to decide their own future, and there is a better tomorrow for their children, security for their families, is the image that needs to fire the imagination of the target audience. ☺

Conclusion